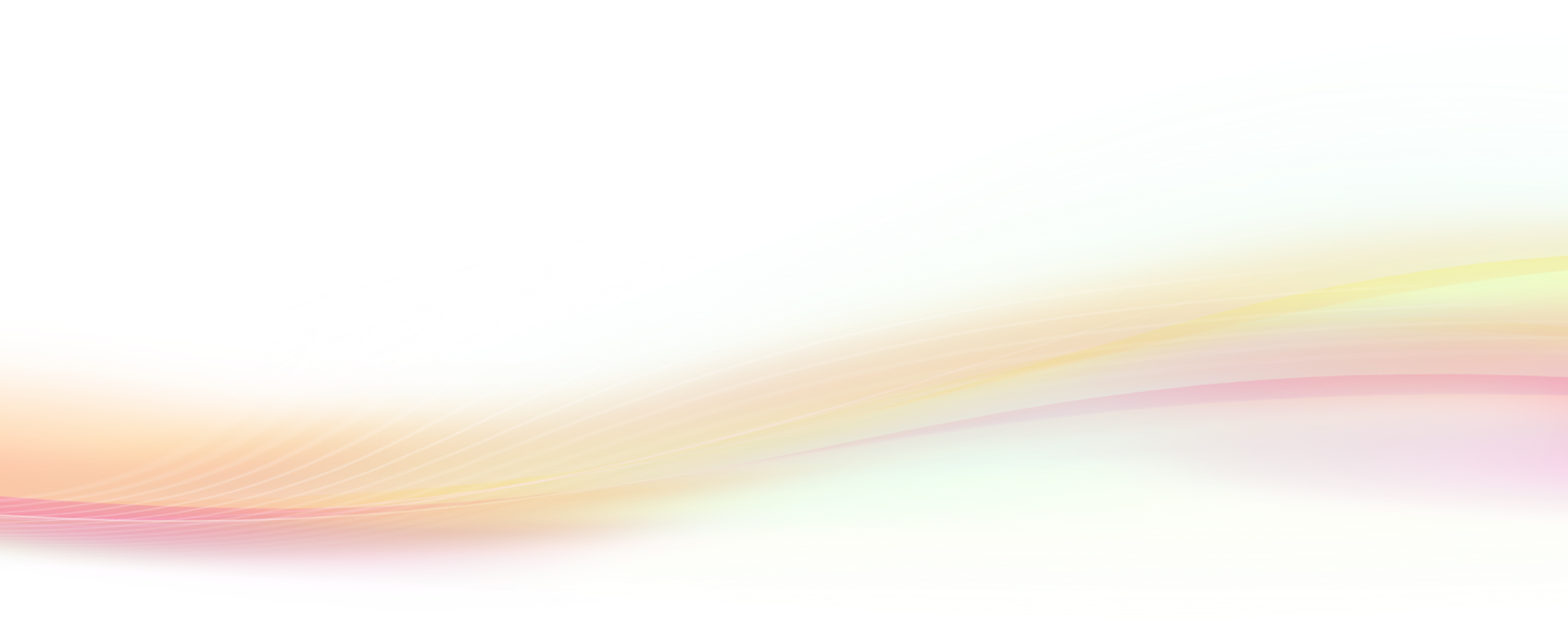
**Extended Essay**

*The portrayal of a psychopath in ‘American Psycho’*

Amelia Rose Khue Nguyen



**Subject**: English Literature A1

**School** **Name**: British International School Vietnam

**Examination** **Session**: May 2014

**Candidate** **Name**: Amelia Rose Khue Nguyen

**Candidate** **Number**: 002389 - 0051

**Research** **Question**: What is the significance of narrative perspective in *American Psycho* by Bret Easton Ellis?

**Date** **of** **submission**: 15.11.13

**Abstract** **word** **count**: 271

**Essay** **word** **count** (excluding headings): 3,924

**Supervisor**: Mr Damian Ballantine

**Contents Page**

Table of Contents

Abstract3

Introduction4

Essay body5-15

Conclusion15-16

Bibliography17

**Abstract**

The following essay explores the question, ‘what is the significance of narrative perspective in *American Psycho* by Bret Easton Ellis?’ Several aspects of narrative perspective are examined: how narrative perspective is used to shock the reader to different extents, how reliable the narrator is and the effect this has on the novel and its message for the reader, and how the limitations of narrative perspective affect the overall interpretation of the psychopath.

Having read the novel multiple times, careful analysis of Bateman and the impact his narrative perspective has on his portrayal as a psychopath is required. Secondary research into the significance of narrative reliability, first-person narration, and levels and/or effects of transportation of the reader into a novel is collected to inform my understanding of the importance of narrative perspective. Academic essays on the text itself are also used to support my analyses of the effects the novel’s portrayal of Bateman has. This investigation is however restricted: for example, *We Need to Talk About Kevin* was initially included and compared with *American Psycho*, but the word count was not sufficient to explore both texts in as much detail as was required. Additionally, not every element of narrative perspective is examined, such as its effect on the plot itself.

I have found that narrative perspective elicits a specific reaction to the psychopath as designed by the author. It helps Ellis portray Bateman as a vile representation of the flaws in American society and shapes the reader’s reaction to him, guiding their interpretation and conveying Ellis’ ultimate message that society has become corrupt, creating a hideously immoral, materialistic generation in *American Psycho*.

Word count: 271

Introduction

The question of ‘what is the significance of narrative perspective in *American Psycho* by Bret Easton Ellis?’ requires an initial investigation into how narrative perspective in novels creates a lens through which the reader observes and interprets the novel’s purpose. Through this the author can guide them, influencing their degree of personal involvement and attachment to ideas, events or characters. In *American Psycho*, the way in which first-person narrative is used to shock the reader must initially be explored as this is the driving force behind the reader’s interpretation of both the novel and its psychopath. The narrator’s reliability must also be assessed to determine whether or not his account of events is trustworthy – for *American Psycho*, this affects how the reader perceives Bateman’s actions and mental state (which in turn are a reflection of the kind of society in which he lives). The limitations of narrative perspective and the novel’s chronology also influence how the reader reacts to Bateman, as they may acknowledge a possible lack of information, or that the information given may be misleading.

This research question is particularly significant because narrative perspective is critical in developing the reader’s feelings about the psychopath presented within the text; as such it is essential to understand the effects and constraints of narrative perspective in order to appreciate how this literary feature has been used to shape Bateman and elicit the desired response to him from the reader, thus enabling Ellis to communicate his commentary on the social and/or moral purposelessness that was beginning to feature prominently in modern American society and how it had affected an entire generation of young Americans.

Examining narrative perspective is crucial because of its impact on Ellis’ ability to shock the reader. In *American Psycho*, the intimate nature of Bateman’s incredibly explicit, upfront narration transports the reader directly to that moment in the novel. This makes each encounter extremely shocking and confrontational, adding to the reality of the narrative since readers are placed in the scenes themselves, forcing them to be a figurative part of the event. This theory is supported by Green’s (2004) idea that the high degree of transportation - characteristic of first-person narratives - results in the fictional world seeming “more like a real place;” so when Bateman extensively describes torturing and murdering an unnamed girl (pp. 308-10), the scenario is made more vivid and the experience more intense, evoking powerful feelings of revulsion and shock due to the unquestionably obscene situation. The graphic account, of which there are several more throughout the text, compels the reader to experience first-hand how Bateman “[pushes] the Habitrail tube up into this bitch’s cunt” (p. 309) while she is still conscious. The vulgar language here makes the description all the more explicit, especially with the use of “cunt,” a taboo word. This makes the description feel raw and confrontational to the reader, a sentiment that is enhanced by the harshness of the word itself: the plosive ‘c’ at the beginning gives it a guttural edge, and the abrupt ‘t’ at the end makes the word grating and appallingly profane. It is also aggressive and overtly sexual, emphasising Bateman’s total lack of respect for his victim. The reader then witnesses how Bateman uses a chainsaw to tear through her body “so fast that she stays alive long enough to watch [him] pull her legs away from her body (p. 310).” The reader is not allowed to look at the events from a distance and therefore maintain at least a modicum of detachment – they are placed in the heat of the moment and become directly involved in the atrocities that make up a significant proportion of Patrick Bateman’s life.

The range of emotions felt, such as disgust and horror towards Bateman, nausea about the events themselves, and fear and/or overwhelming distress towards his victims, makes the reader view Bateman as an even greater evil because he and his predominantly first-person narrative have forced them to not only witness his depravity but also to be complicit in the acts. Even if the reader is open to the possibility of Bateman being mentally unstable, the high shock factor they are faced with because of the lens through which the story’s events are viewed means it becomes irrelevant – the effect on the reader still occurs. The reader has already been drawn, however sickeningly, into the story and has been jolted by the relative trauma of experiencing a fictional murder. In this way Ellis’ use of Bateman’s first-person narrative enables him to powerfully shock and horrify the reader because not only are they presented with an immoral, alien psychopath, they also have no choice but to reside in his mind, witnessing every ruthless slaying – made all the more atrocious by Bateman’s two primary emotional states (sick enjoyment and disturbing nonchalance) when carrying out these acts.

Another way narrative perspective in *American Psycho* shocks the reader is through Ellis’ message about the flaws in American society. His criticism of the distortion of American values is the core of the novel, and Bateman is used to convey how superficial, vacuous and materialistic society has become. He is incapable of forming meaningful relationships with others, and this detachment shows in his killings: at one point he rationalises his actions by reminding himself “this thing, this girl, this meat, is nothing (p. 325).” In demonstrating how utterly devoid of empathy or any relatable human emotion Bateman is, Ellis shows how the deterioration of American society and its worsening moral decay has given rise to creatures like Bateman, whose chief concerns include securing dinner reservations at upscale restaurants and maintaining his physique. Bateman’s obvious, unapologetic narcissism is disconcerting because it clashes with what is considered socially acceptable behaviour (in that some modesty, or at least the pretence of modesty, is expected) – this in turn is unsettling for the reader because it reflects Ellis troubling point about the shallow, careless attitude that has become characteristic within American society. This, coupled with the apparent inability of Bateman and his peers to accurately distinguish one acquaintance from another, underlines the absolute lack of personal worth and individuality possessed by the affluent members of American society, showing just how far Ellis believes America has fallen from its pedestal, whereby the hallmark of the American Dream and its values has been corrupted into a dangerous mentality that revolves around greed and the relentless need for more than what one already has. This adds another element to the shock factor of *American Psycho*: the reader is not only appalled by Bateman’s actions, but also by society’s integral role in his development as a killer because it has allowed its ideals to become heinously muddied, strengthening this idea of moral decay and its prominence in modern American society.

Chronology is a vital factor in determining the ability of the text to shock the reader through narrative perspective. Because *American Psycho* is written in present tense, there is an urgency that reverberates throughout the novel, constantly spiking as Bateman engages in repeated murders and appears to be devolving rapidly as the novel nears its end, as can be seen when he starts drinking his own urine (p. 357), feeding human brains to dogs in public (p. 359), and openly confessing to his crimes (p. 362). The use of present tense narrative builds up the suspense and anticipation throughout the novel because the reader, having been transported into the story, has no knowledge of how the plot will unfold. This enhances their sense of apprehension because it adds to the text’s (and Bateman’s) unpredictability. Through Bateman there is no narrative fragmentation in the form of jumping between time periods, which would enable the reader to pause and take stock of the novel’s events, thus slowing the pace and reducing the overall hard-hitting impact of any confronting incidents. This chronological setup within *American* *Psycho* lends itself readily to the shock factor that is created by Ellis through his use of narrative perspective because the reader is always directly engaged with Bateman and his deplorable activities, never being given the opportunity to stop and remember that they are reading a novel with fictitious events. This in turn helps him achieve the desired reaction of disgust for Bateman and all that he represents about American consumerist society at the time, in that because the reader is not able to take the time to carefully evaluate their feelings about Bateman, all they have is their instinctive reaction to him. As a result, they are ultimately left with what is also their instinctive reaction to the aforementioned concepts about American society that Bateman symbolises – this makes the truth about how deeply American morals have been corrupted more or less inescapable to the average reader.

Another fundamental issue faced by readers in terms of narrative perspective is the extent to which the narrator, and therefore their version of events, can be trusted. In this sense Patrick Bateman’s reliability in Ellis’ *American Psycho* is made dubious almost immediately due to the unfamiliar, often incomprehensible way in which he narrates. This can be seen through his randomly interspersed lectures on musical artists including Genesis (pp. 125-29), Whitney Houston (pp. 237-39), and Huey Lewis and the News (pp. 331-37); his clearly erratic thoughts; and his illogical, rambling sentences. At one point Bateman goes from focusing on his Walkman to licking the mousse-infused sweat that drips down his face to walking up Broadway and buying a teapot, then being afflicted with cramps before buying an assortment of products he intends to use for torturing purposes and then finally questioning whether or not he actually bought the teapot (Ellis, 1991, p. 140) – all in one incredibly long run-on sentence. As one of many examples of Bateman’s bizarre stream of consciousness, this suggests that he is most likely mentally unstable and his narrative trustworthiness is therefore suspect at best due to his apparent lack of rationality and coherency. This is primarily reinforced when considered in context of one working definition of an unreliable narrator as being someone who has “misreported…misevaluated…or underregarded” (Phillips, 2009) the events they recount. Bateman’s perception of himself and his actions is not in accordance with that of his acquaintances – he thinks he is a “fucking evil psychopath,” (p. 18) whereas his girlfriend and best friend call him the “boy next door,” (p. 10) which not only indicates that they see him as a harmless friend and that no one who knows him would imagine him capable of the kinds of horrific crimes he commits, but also detracts slightly from his self-created image as a merciless murderer. This seed of potential doubt is made stronger by Bateman’s occasionally lucid, seemingly reliable narration, for example in the beginning when he actually comes across as a better, less unnerving character than Price, avoiding the unpleasant bigotry that Price exhibits while also narrating in a clear, fluid style (pp. 3-21). There is a double effect of this: firstly, Bateman portrays himself as not actually being as terrible a person as he later makes himself out to be (thus adding to the inconsistencies between his own assessment of himself and that of his peers), and secondly, he marks himself as a confusing and therefore unreliable narrator because his narrative is generally almost senseless, yet there are rare flashes of clarity – this is yet another inconsistency of Bateman’s that makes the reader unlikely to trust him and his narrative perspective, even if purely because of the fact that he does not follow one clear style of narration.

Yet another factor that contradicts Bateman’s self-professed evil is the way in which he describes the brutal murder of two women in Paul Owen’s apartment (p. 272), but when he later returns (p. 344) there is no indication of this. All of this evidence indicates a glaring disparity between Bateman’s claims and the contradictory evidence against them, making it possible that Bateman’s account of events may be unreliable. This duplicity of internal thoughts not matching external actions (in that Bateman portrays himself as an incredible serial killer, yet this is not always supported by his peers or by evidence) also conveys Ellis’ comment on American society’s overblown notions of grandeur and the constant need to be better than others (as seen when Bateman competes with his peers over business cards (pp. 41-42)) and how dangerous this could be.

Portraying Bateman as a potentially unreliable narrator means his confessions of violence are unreliable by association, and the perspective for the reader changes. Instead of simply experiencing the novel and its gruesome contents through the eyes of a cold-blooded psychopath, another possibility becomes somewhat viable: that the novel is told by someone whose deviant behaviour is imagined. This is discussed by Kooijman and Laine (2003), who conclude that Bateman’s unreliability “forces the reader to realize that the killings only take place in Bateman’s mind.” Such a realisation could affect the reader’s feelings towards Bateman and his actions, mitigating his portrayal as a psychopath; however, it is virtually impossible to make such certain statements because the indication of unreliability does not necessarily prove he never committed any crimes. Whilst there may be some doubt, such definitive conclusions prevent the reader from seeing the numerous facets of Bateman’s character. Moreover, in providing a possible opportunity for the reader to at least partially excuse Bateman’s behaviour, Ellis hints at modern American society’s lack of culpability when it comes to addressing its own problems as he indicates how members of society almost invariably try to scapegoat someone or something else in order to avoid taking responsibility.

Having a reliable narrator eliminates the possibility of any sympathy for Bateman, whereas introducing the idea of unreliability allows Ellis to add another layer of complexity to Bateman’s character by making it harder for the reader to pigeonhole him. Not entirely trusting Bateman’s narration could lessen the impact of his portrayal as a killer and paint him in a slightly more sympathetic light. This could relate to the collective American psyche at the time: the novel is called *American Psycho* for a reason, the implication being that Bateman is the product of American consumerism and its consequential moral corruption, therefore Americans and the society they have created is at least partly at fault. Bateman’s obsessive preoccupation with material goods is highlighted periodically throughout the novel in extensive descriptions, for example when he references a seemingly endless list of brand names from pages 23 to 27, including an “original David Onica…a thirty-inch digital TV set from Toshiba [which is] a high-contrast highly defined model [with] a four-corner video stand with a high-tech tube combination from NEC…[and] Steuben glass animals placed strategically around expensive crystal ashtrays from Fortunoff, though I don’t smoke.” (Ellis, 1991, pp. 23-27) The astonishingly elaborate documentation of his possessions is Ellis’ way of showing how excessive materialism has warped American society to such an extent that some individuals equate their self-worth with the value of their possessions. Because Bateman epitomises this social degradation, the reader may not want to believe he is a completely depraved person capable of such terrible acts because it would be tantamount to acknowledging the degeneracy that has occurred within American societal values, and the grave repercussions this has had. Furthermore, in reading about the items Bateman owns, the reader is to an extent made complicit in his condemnable consumerism in that they are likely to come across descriptions of goods they too own, such as flat-screen televisions and other luxury products. This adds yet another chilling facet to Bateman’s character because, to the reader (who, like Bateman, is likely to take a certain degree of pride or pleasure in some of their material possessions), he has become more of a real person: he could be any other man walking down the streets of New York, as opposed to being a strictly fictional, somewhat ludicrous character in a novel. One of the biggest advantages to the reader of Bateman’s narrative unreliability was the fact that it gave them the opportunity to view him as what he is: a figment of Ellis’ imagination. This ability to restrict him to the realm of the unreal and therefore unthreatening would have given the reader a degree of peace of mind: at the end of the story, they could put the novel down and leave Bateman and all he represents between pages of *American Psycho*. However, as Bateman goes on to list more and more products that could potentially be owned by the reader himself, Ellis provides a parallel that can be drawn between Bateman and the reader. This strengthens Ellis’ message about the moral decay that has afflicted American society by making it significantly harder for the reader to try and distance himself from Bateman and the ideas Ellis communicates through his character, because if they too own a number of material goods that Bateman owns, then he becomes less of a freak occurrence and more of a real, frightening possibility. It also becomes abundantly clear to the reader how practically every member of society has succumbed to the excessive consumerism that had redefined the American lifestyle, forcing them into a position where there is no other choice but to acknowledge that, while Bateman may be the physical manifestation of the most horrific and appalling aspects of the distortion of American societal values, the factors that enabled someone like him to evolve exist everywhere, in virtually every American household, thus making the danger he poses far more realistic and therefore terrifying. While sadistic murderers may be quantifiable, the underlying factors that led to their creation are not tangible – this leaves the reader with the idea that anyone could become tainted to the extent where they too become a monster of some description, even if not to Bateman’s degree.

As with any text in which narrative perspective plays an important role, it is vital to understand its limitations. In *American Psycho*, Bateman’s established narrative unreliability limits his value because the reader only receives his one-sided view as opposed to a more balanced one that would be provided by other perspectives, or alternately a more objective third-person narrative voice. Bateman’s limited narration may not give a full scope of events, as highlighted by his account of a meeting with Luis Carruthers in the Yale Club’s bathroom: he describes a scene where he attempts to murder Carruthers, even saying he wants Carruthers “to know who it is who is killing him (p. 148).” Yet Carruthers reacts bizarrely by kissing Bateman’s wrist (p. 148). This demonstrates to the reader the extent of Bateman’s narrative limitations because they are not given any explanation for this unexpected behaviour. When the narrator is deemed to be unreliable, it becomes important for the reader to have another perspective in order to gain a more balanced and therefore understandable and informative perspective. Additionally, in only receiving Bateman’s perspective, the reader is unable both to compare his character to others within the text and to determine the accuracy of the world Bateman depicts. Through his eyes, the world of 1980s New York is a “bad and cruel place,” (p. 151) filled with empty, poisonous people who are just as toxic to society as he is, albeit in a different way. While the reader may not be equipped with all the information about every character they are presented with through Bateman’s eyes, what they do know of most of the characters is generally negative: most of Bateman’s peers seem riddled with vices, from drug use to infidelity to racism and more. While he may be the killer, they are the ones who are so self-absorbed and morally lacking that they cannot even be bothered to try and see beyond the thin surface layer of Bateman’s persona. Despite his blatant attempts to reveal his true nature to several people, not a single person even takes the time to properly listen to him, thus showing how American society was ultimately as responsible as Bateman for the dark, iniquitous world they lived in.

It could be argued that there is in fact another form of narrative perspective through the character of Timothy Price (pp. 3-22), especially in the beginning of the novel when Bateman’s narrative voice is still being established and the reader has not yet become familiar with his perspective or personality. Price may represent an extension of Bateman’s narrative, providing an initial layer of the ingrained sense of superiority and disdain towards lower socio-economic classes (p. 6) that gradually become evident in Bateman himself. Söderlind (2008) argues the idea that Price acts as an “external projection of Patrick’s interiority,” and in doing so gives the reader more insight into Bateman, particularly in the early stages of the novel. However, this explanation seems stretched, and a more likely interpretation of Price may be as a different kind of person from the same generation as Bateman – a generation that has largely been characterised through Bateman as shallow and vapid. At first, Bateman and Patrick could conceivably be two sides of the same person, but by the end of the novel it is clear that Price is in no way a “projection” of Bateman. Whereas Bateman feels trapped in a meaningless world that makes his crimes inconsequential, Price actually takes steps to do something to change his empty life. He disappears for the majority of the novel, but when he reappears he seems different. He can no longer attack others with such ferocity, as seen when he is unable to find the words to criticise President Reagan (p. 371). This suggests that Price is doing what Bateman simply cannot: changing as a person. Ellis’ use of Price is not about creating an extension of Bateman’s character; instead, it is about conveying to the reader the idea that there is still a chance for humanity because change is still possible, and even someone as obnoxious and unpleasant as Price can change.

Conclusion

Ultimately, Ellis predominantly uses narrative perspective in order to communicate certain ideas about American society and its values (or lack thereof) through Bateman. Ellis’ use of narrative perspective gives him the ability to portray his psychopath as an undeniably depraved, twisted maniac whom no reader could genuinely relate to or even fully understand. Bateman’s practically unprecedented (in contemporary literature) violence and apparent state of mental chaos makes him almost incomprehensible: the perspective presented is tailored to suit a specific purpose, in that Ellis distorts Bateman’s perspective beyond the believable because his novel is in many ways a parody. Narrative perspective is used to guide the reader’s interpretation of the novel as a whole, since it builds the framework for Bateman’s depiction - he is made to come across as an unreliable narrator whose sickening first-person narrative forces the reader into his story and his almost fiendish life. This sentiment can then be extrapolated to the flawed features of American society (such as its rampant greed, lack of individuality and sincerity, obsession with material goods and public image, and inability to accept responsibility for what is has played a part in creating) that Ellis suggests are the root cause of such yuppie, egotistical monsters (of which Bateman is emblematic) being made. Narrative perspective in *American Psycho* enables Ellis to evoke certain emotions and reactions from the reader depending on Bateman’s behaviour, thoughts and actions, thus making the response to his killer all the more powerful: Bateman is designed to be a terrible character that disgusts the reader, making him a tool used to demonstrate the many grievous pitfalls Ellis believes have become a tragic feature of American society.

# Bibliography

* Ellis, B. E. (1991). *American Psycho.* New York: Vintage Books.
* Green, M. C. (2004). Transportation into Narrative Worlds: The Role of Prior Knowledge and Perceived Realism. *Discourse Processes* *, 38* (2), pp. 247-266.
* Laine, T., & Kooijman, J. (2003). *American Psycho: A Double Portrait of Serial Yuppie Patrick Bateman.* Post Script, Inc.
* Nielsen, H. S. (2004). The Impersonal Voice in First-Person Narrative Fiction. *Narrative* *, 12* (2), 133-150.
* Phillips, J. (2009). Unreliable Narration in Bret Easton Ellis' American Psycho: Interaction Between Narrative Form and Thematic Content. *Current Narratives* , 60-67.
* Söderlind, S. (2008). Branding the Body American: Violence and Self-fashioning from The Scarlett Letter to American Psycho. *Canadian Review of American Studies* *, 38* (1), 63-81.
* Shriver, L. (2003). *We Need to Talk About Kevin.* California: Counterpoint Press.